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ABSTRACT

Facing the problem of a wide discrepancy in grading standards for student essays, the English department at a Texas community college developed a standardized method of grading students' expository and persuasive essays. The department established a committee of 10 full-time instructors whose objective was to standardize grading for all required essays. The committee developed five categories of criteria: (1) content, purpose, thesis, and support for thesis; (2) organization, development, and paragraphs; (3) sentences; (4) word use and tone; and (5) punctuation and mechanics. The categories were refined after a semester to include a "D" grade as well as "A," "B," and "C." Additionally, a sliding scale and a "no grade" option were incorporated. "B" papers were then differentiated from "A" papers as being accurate rather than superior, as worthwhile rather than valuable, and as lacking "rich" content. "C" papers were then defined as sketchy and routine, and "D" or "F" papers showed poor theses and little or irrelevant support. A review of the revised criteria indicates that they need some refinement, as "A's" and "F's" are difficult to assign, but that on the whole they have provided more specific direction for students looking to revise their work, and they have reduced grading time. (JC)

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Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English (77th, Los Angeles, CA, November 20-25, 1987) by SuzAnne Cole of Houston Community College as part of a panel titled "How to Grade 6,000 Freshmen a Year Happily, Evenly and Fairly"

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# Using Required Departmental Grading Profiles

The emphasis in English 1301 is on expository writing and in English 1302 the emphasis is on persuasion, style and research. Seventy to eighty percent of the final grade is based on essays.

Three years ago during a division workshop attended by all full and part-time faculty, all English teachers read and graded a set of eight student essays. Then Ray Leighman, Director of the Writing Center at Texas A and M who makes the final decision on whether or not students have mastered English composition, analyzed the essays on a pass/fail basis. Most of us were surprised to find that he would have failed all eight essays as many of us had passed 6 with D's and failed only two, while others had graded some essays as high as B and many had given C's to some. Obviously, there was a wide discrepancy in departmental grading standards and although this is not unique to HCCS instructors (research shows this to be the case even when graders have had some

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training in common and our instructors, many of whom are new each semester, have not), it still was disquieting.

So, in true humanities fashion, we established a committee of ten full-time instructors whose objective was to standardize grading in freshman English, not just mid-term and final esssays, but all required essays. After extemsive reading, we made some initial decisions:

1. First, holistic grading was impractical. Our large number of campuses and staggered class meeting times from 8am to 10:00 pm Monday to Saturday made holistic grading by more than one reader impractical.

2. Yet we had evidence that holistic scoring by only one reader produced widely varying grades and thus was too individualistic.

3. Third, therefore, we needed some type of standardized profile which could be easily applied by all instructors to all essays.

4. We examined the available profiles such as Lloyd-Jones' primary scoring traits, Deiderich's analystic profile and ETS General Impression Scoring.

5. However, and I cannot stress this too highly, most of the research agrees that grading scales or profiles should be locally developed to reflect the standards which the individual writing community believes important. Also, instructors who teach the courses where the evaluation will occur must be involved in the process.

So the committee worked for several months, deciding

first what traits were most important in freshman writing and how to describe them. Because we looked for different qualities in 1301 and 1302, we wrote different profiles for each course. We ended up with five categories of traits for all papers except the research paper which needed three additional columns to reflect the research process. In your handout you have copies of the profiles which you might want to look at with me now, beginning with the 1301.

1. These categories in order of importance are content, which includes suitability of content to audience, purpose and assignment; thesis; and support for thesis.

2. The second category or column is organization including plan or strategy, development of plan and paragraphs, transitions between paragraphs, quality of title, introduction and conclusion

3. The third category is sentences including correctness and skill in coordination, subordination and variety.

4. The fourth category is word use and tone which also includes diction and correct word forms .

5. The last category, punctuation and mechanics, includes capitalization, spelling and manuscript form .

We also had to decide how much value to give to each of the categories. We wanted the number values for each category to be small enough so that they could easily be added without pen and pencil. An attached conversion scale would simplify converting the numbers to a 100 point basis

and thus to a letter grade.

We also wanted each description to consist of more than a single phrase or word so that an instructor could easily underline the specific problem a student has with the specific paper.

After much revision and fine-tuning, the profiles were reduced, enhanced and reproduced in the department-developed workbook, one for each essay package. Then we sat back to wait for results. And, of course, since English teachers in the aggregate are a notably non-reticent group, we did not have to wait long. Within a semester the committee on grading standards was reconvened to deal with several problems, and the profile was revised to the form which you hold.

First, the primary change was the addition of the D grade. Our first scale was lableled A, B, C and unsatisfactory. We modified this because students were horrified to think they could not "earn" a D (although numerically they could)

We also shifted from a single numerical value for each letter grade to a sliding scale primarily because most instructors were moving up or down from the single number anyway.

We also added the NG or No Grade for essays which are unacceptable.

To continue examining the profiles which you have, let's look at the Content category for the A 1301 essay. We try to

emphasize originality and suitability for selected audiences. (Students list their audience and purpose for writing on the cover sheet of all essays.)

The B essay changes from the A in being accurate rather than superior, worthwhile rather than valuable, and without the necessity for "rich" content.

The C essay is acceptable but routine, predictable, perhaps a little sketchy or too general, perhaps one or two unsupported generalization. Still, however, there is some reader interest.

The D and F essays show in varying degress little or no grasp of the writing context, a weak, unapparent or irrelevant thesis, not enough support or irrelevant support, or perhaps content too vague to illustrate the thesis and subsequently will be of little or no interest to the selected audience.

To compare the additional requirements of English 1302, let's look at the Content category. Because 1302 emphasizes persuasion, to get an A, the student must display impressive use of analysis along with recognition and rebuttal of counter-arguments. Essays must also be the specified length. Again, the B differs from the A in being accurate rather than superior, substantial rather than impressive, The C essay is acceptable and adequate but may slant some of the evidence or include irrelevancies. The D and F essays may not support the thesis, may not have enough evidence, or may totally disregard opposing arguments or points of view.

The research paper includes three additional categories, the format of the final draft (title page, formal outline, body, works cited page, correct punctuation of documentation, correct pagination, and perhaps optional tables or appendices), the research process (on time and error-free completion of all research process parts (narrow topic, working bibliography, working thesis, scratch outline, note cards,bibliography cards, rough draft chunk, peer and self analysis, complete rough draft and on time completion of final draft), and quality and use of sources (at least five authoritative sources, at least 15 judiciously selected and correctly integrated quotes and paraphrases, clear acknowledgements).

Now that we have been using the revised profile for awhile, some of us are beginning to discuss further refinements. We are finding that it is almost impossible to give an A and perhaps equally difficult to give an F, not in the individual categories but overall. You can totally fail a student for content and organization, but if his construction is flawless, he may still earn a D.

We probably should rewrite the profile for the narration essay as the profile is geared toward the expository mode. Perhaps each specific essay package needs its own content column.

Although we assume that the quality of the writing process affects the quality of the final package, and we can give an NG for an incomplete package, perhaps the profile

still does not adequately reflect the process of writing.

Many of us still feel the need to write a comment or two on the essay and would like space on the profile to do so.

Some students forget to turn in their profiles with their packages.

On the whole, though we are happy with the profile and feel its use has definite benefits.

First, it provides more specific comments for students. No one teacher reading approximately 150 essays every two weeks could make as many comments on each paper as the profile provides.

Second, it aids self and peer analysis and revision because the descriptors can be used as guidelines and checklists.

Third, it provides a quick visual check for students on which areas of their writing need work. If solid B papers in content and organization are consistently earning low C's because of failures in mechanics, a student knows he or she should go to the learning lab and work on weaknesses. Because the instructor has underlined specifics the student also knows that he or she doesn't just need to work on grammar, but, for example, on pronoun-antecdent agreement.

Fourth, we believe that the consistent use of the profile by all instructors has standardized grading.

Fifth, student complaints about unfair, too subjective grading have diminished considerably. This was not a stated objective and indeed one which we did not expect. We assume

that it occurs because it is harder to argue with numbers, especially broken down into specific areas. Students seem pleased to know exactly what they need to work on to improve grades, rather than the vague weak organiztion or "work on diction" which characterized previous papers.

Sixth, many instructors have found that once they have learned the profile, their grading time has been reduced.

We hope that if you have considered using a profile, you will benefit from our errors and our experience. I would like to reiterate that rather than using this profile in your situation, that you work as we did, form a committee and establish what must be evaluated in the writing that your students do.